

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Project Outreach

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1136

IRENE WALLACE

Interviewed on

September 5, 1974

By

Debra Griffith

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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Interviewee: IRENE WALLACE (and husband, Claude Wallace)

Interviewer: Debra Griffith

Subject: Project Outreach

Date: September 5, 1974

DG: [This is an interview with Irene Wallace on September 5, 1974 at her home 2825 Nelson Avenue.] The woman I talked to said you were born in 1896. We're doing this on the Depression.

IW: Oh yes, I remember the Depression. My goodness.

DG: Let me just make sure this is recording. Mrs. Wallace, you weren't born in Youngstown?

IW: No, I was born in Virginia.

DG: And when did you come here?

IW: 1926 in April.

DG: And why did you come to Youngstown?

IW: My dad was working up here. He came up before we did. And he was working at the Sheet and Tube. Then afterward, we came up in about '26. He came up about a year before we did.

DG: And where did you first move to in Youngstown?

IW: When we came up, we were living in Girard because my husband was working at, I think they call it, the Plate Mill out there in Girard. So we were living out there.

DG: Did you husband from Virginia too?

IW: No, he was from Carolina.

DG: So he came here about the same time as you?

IW: Yes.

DG: Then when did you come to Youngstown?

IW: That's when we came from Virginia, we moved into Girard. We lived there I would say for about a year. And then we moved over here in Youngstown and at that time we were living on the North Side. The street cars were running at that time from Youngstown out to Girard and back. I don't remember clearly, but I think in 1928 when we moved to the South Side, there were street car tracks up and down Glenwood. But the streetcars weren't running up there then. They just had these rattling buses.

DG: So you moved to the Southside in 1928. You mentioned that you remembered the Depression.

IW: Oh, I think everybody remembers the Depression!

DG: How did the Depression effect you?

IW: Well, to tell the truth, a lot of people said we didn't have enough to eat and we didn't have clothes. But the Sheet and Tube used to let the employees have groceries. I don't know how they did that now. We always had plenty to eat and I sewed too. My mother and I would make over

things. We'd buy the material and make the kids school clothes. We may not have had a lot of money at the time, but we had plenty of food and clothing. We never stood in line for soup. My husband would work at the Sheet and Tube. Sometimes, not everyday. It wasn't too bad. My friend and I sometimes we'd combine our food. She would come over and she would cook one thing and I would cook something else. It made it nice. I really had no problem.

DG: Do you know anybody that did have a problem?

IW: There were some people. We were living down at 656 High Street then. There were some neighbors who went down. They had the soup kitchens then at the Third Baptist Church. They had buckets of something and they'd go down and get the soup and come back. Some people were out of work and they had problems, but it never really affected me. We canned a lot. We had gardens. What we pulled from the garden we canned and we had food a plenty. That brings to mind the other day when we were talking about canning. I don't can a thing now. I canned so much then! You know there used to be a farmers' market over on the corner of Federal, what was West Lake Park, like the High Street Market. The farmers would come in and bring the produce. We used to go over at night my mother and dad and my husband and get the things we didn't get have in the garden. And that's how we had stuff to can. It had certain days, like they do at High Street Market, to get the produce.

DG: We're your children born in Girard then?

IW: The oldest daughter, Mariam, was. And she started school, in fact both of them started school, down here. Calvin Center down on Mahoning Ave and West Avenue, that used to be the old West Side School. The kids used to go down there to school. Then they moved them up to Grant, that's up on Edwards Street. That's where they started to go then on Grant. But that old West Side school, all the kids around in this neighborhood would go there.

DG: I'll have to check that out. What did you do for recreation?

IW: Oh, we'd go to the movies and baseball. They used to have baseball up on Evans Field across from Lexington. It's a playground. They have a women's softball teams and then they had a men's team up there. And then we'd play cards sometimes amongst ourselves when the kids are good and laid back. That was just about it.

DG: You said you used to go to the movies. Would that be the Warner Theater?

IW: The old Warner Theater and the State Theater that used to be down on the Square. And- what's the theater they tore down across from McKelvey? It was still there. Was that the Park Theater? Anyhow, we would go to the movies. They had some pretty good shows.

DG: Did they have a hippodrome in the back?

IW: Yes. They had a hippodrome. Yes, we would go there. It depends on what was playing. The different shows. I think that most everybody went to the movies then because its different than looking at television. Or listening to the radio. That was recreation for us. Oh, we'd go out Mill Creek Park. We'd fish out there sometimes. We didn't catch nothing, but we'd be fishing!

DG: Do you remember any particular stage shows? They didn't have movies, did they?

IW: Yeah.

DG: They did? I thought it was all live shows.

IW: No, as far as I can remember they did. I can't remember the names of the movies, but some of these historical pictures that like Charles Heston plays in, The Ten Commandments and so on. They're old pictures. The Road. Oh, I can't think other than that. We did see Lillian Gish in The Scarlet Letter. I used to make it my business to go see Clark Gable's pictures. But then when you go back to remember most of the names- no!

DG: Did you remember, was the circus still coming to town?

IW: Oh yes. We used to have circus. Mostly the circus would come up on West Federal Street which would be near Worthington Street now. It was a field on the right-hand side going up Federal Street and they'd have the circus every year up there. And we would go to it. I don't think the big circuses come to Youngstown anymore. They would come and stay a week. They'd have big crowds out in front.

DG: What circus was it?

IW: I don't remember anything about it then.

DG: Did you or your husband belong to any clubs or anything?

IW: My husband belonged to the Masons but social clubs- no. We never joined that stuff. Just clubs in the church.

DG: We're just trying to find out about organizations. Do you ever go to Stambaugh Auditorium?

IW: I didn't go up there in the early days. Its been in the later days that I went up to Stambaugh Auditorium. I never did go up there before then.

DG: Do you remember anything about the Lindbergh flight?

IW: I remember that everybody was on pins and needles waiting. It was exciting, waiting to know whether he'd land. Then there were big celebrations. Everyone would show up because he made the trip safe. When he died the other day, it was sad. You think back, and he made that trip in a single engine plane across all that water. He really had nerve.

DG: Did you know he flew over Youngstown?

IW: No. I didn't at the time. That's the first time I heard that.

DG: It was in the paper.

IW: No, if I'd read it...

DG: I haven't found anyone who remembers that yet! That was one of the first airplanes. You're closer to the airport here. Most people are farther out of town and they don't remember much about the airplanes.

IW: No, the airport for me... I know they pass over this house and I don't like that! There are some things that you just take for granted. You really don't pay much attention at the time unless there some deep thing about it. And then it will pass and you don't remember it again. Unless someone gets to talking about it and they bring in something. They say "Well so-and-so" and "Do you remember that?" Otherwise, you take some of those things for granted.

DG: What happened to.. Do

IW: No there were no strikes. He quit in 1962. He was foreman. He was made foreman during the Second World War. There weren't many strikes at the time. They had the union then, of course, but people weren't striking then as they are now.

DG: Did they have lock outs?

IW: It seems to have been settled amongst the steward and the management. And then they got to the place then that they started to strike. And they may pay average, but I don't know.

DG:

IW: They benefited from information about the different old job problems. They had it in the paper not too long ago because somebody from the Vindicator came to interview my husband.

They had different opinions about what happened on that job at that time. Those that were running the mill that were working different jobs in Youngstown. It was printed every Sunday I think.

DG: What did your husband do? I'd like to talk to him too.

IW: He's downstairs making some cabinets. I'm going to call him because I may get it wrong. I'll leave his part of it out.

DG: Stock market crash? How did it effect many people?

IW: It probably did, especially the banks. I think it effected most all the money people. And the banks and that sort of thing closing down. Money in the banks. But not having any at the time, it didn't bother me!

DG: You referred to the money people. Do you mean....

IW: Like people who had savings in their stores and that sort of thing.

DG: Do you remember many stores closing?

IW: There may have been some stores close. Like I said now, you think back and I don't remember them. It could have been some stores close. Just about in everything, there were some stores closing on account they didn't have the money and people weren't buying. They didn't have nothing to buy with.

DG: I have some stuff here about the big bands era when there were some big bands coming to Idora Park.

IW: Well I know we used to go down to the Keith [-Albee] Theater. That was on the square. They used to have Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton. They would have them down there. We

used to go down there when they came in. Benny Goodman that played the instruments. And on the Square, they had during the World Series, every year, they had a score board- a simulation. They'd have the batters and everything. We used to go down just about every day and stand and look at this board. And you could hardly get a place to stand because there'd be so many people down there. Looking at the score board. Right down there on the square they had the scoreboard set up. Was it at the Keith? You know where that little branch library was on square? Well, we would stand right all around there and look at this score board. It had a simulation, the batters and running, and everything. It was exciting. Just like looking at a real ball game. You'd be surprised at the people that would be down there looking at this game.

DG: And do you know what year was that?

IW: I'm trying to think if we were living on the other side of town. I think so and if so, I know it was after 1928. There might be a lot of people that remember that. It used to be down there. You could hardly get a place to stand at that time. That was during the World Series.

DG: And Duke Ellington and all them were here?

IW: Yes, you'd see them. They were on stage with their band. And Lionel Hampton and Benny Goodman and Peg Leg Bates. Do you remember reading anything about him? He was a colored tap dancer. He had a peg leg and he used to travel with the band. He was very good. I don't know what happened to him now. I haven't read anything about him a in a long time.

DG: What was the Keith Theater like?

IW: It was a very palatial place. Inside it was very nice. With all the drapes. I'm trying to think when they tore that theater down. I know it's been torn down now for quite some time. It was something like the Warner Theater. Those were the two big theaters at the time.

DG: Did you go to the Warner?

IW: Yes, they had pictures there too. When the band would be there, we used to stand in line and you'd be around the square to go into the theater. That hasn't been torn down too long. Maybe they changed the name of it and that's why you don't know it.

DG: Do you remember when the Warner Theater opened?

IW: No. To me, it seems like it's been open all the time!

DG: You were talking about the banks closing, did you know that all but two banks closed in Youngstown?

IW: No, I really couldn't say. I don't know how many banks...

DG: Now let's go to Prohibition.

IW: I remember Prohibition, but that too didn't bother me because I wasn't raised that way. I know a lot of people at the time that were making their own beer and wine and whiskey. My husband would make it, but that didn't bother me.

DG: I don't know what this is, but its called the Northwest Territory celebrating 160 years.

IW: I don't recall that.

DG: Do you remember any famous people or presidential candidates that would come to Youngstown?

IW: I would never go to see them. I read about them but I wouldn't go downtown to see the parade or anything. Some candidate's train did come through but I didn't go. I can't remember who it was. I remember I was quite small and I don't know why I remember that: One time Teddy Roosevelt came through our town in Virginia. And I knew my mother took me to see him. That's the only one I can remember. I was so small. I don't know why that sticks out in my mind

that I could remember him coming through. I'm trying to remember who that was that came through on the train one time... I can't remember now. You'll have to ask my husband.

DG: There were so many riots in the 1920s and 1930s that I read about. Do you remember anything about these riots? I know Cleveland had some and Akron...

IW: What year was that?

DG: Intermittently, about 1925.

IW: What sort of riots were they?

DG: I think they were racial riots. I don't think they were union.

IW: The only riots I recall are the labor riots that we've had around neighborhoods. I mean just all over, not just in here in Youngstown. You know, the riots that were taking place. I know they were unpleasant.

DG: Did you ever go to the Canfield Fair back then?

IW: No, this has just been about 4 or 5 years ago that we started going out to the Canfield Fair.

DG: I'm surprised more people didn't go. I guess it would have been far to go.

IW: It could have been. I would like to go every year because it's very interesting. But we didn't have a car and my husband doesn't drive. So we always wait on either Mariel or Dorothy and if they could make it out I would go with them. We didn't go this year. We went last year. There's so much raining. You know where I'd really would like to go? Have you ever been to the Columbus Fair? I haven't either but I would love to go there.

DG: The Avenue, Wick Avenue, was it still The Avenue when you came here?

IW: It was Wick Avenue then. As far as I know. I haven't known it is anything else. They started tearing down all those big homes up there. I do know that Youngstown U[niversity] wasn't as large. It hadn't spread as far as it is now. It was smaller when we came here. But it was Wick Avenue then as far as I know.

DG: ... families who live on Wick Avenue...

IW: Evidently, they were there when we came here. It hasn't been too long that they starting tearing those down or they're office buildings. All those buildings that are standing are old houses. All those families are still in there. I'm quite sure.

DG: You said your husband worked until 1962. Was he ever in World War II?

IW: No. He wasn't in the war.

DG: Was anyone ever in the War?

IW: No. We had the two girls. Of course, Mariel worked at the Pentagon for two years or more during that time after she graduated from high school. She and a friend of hers went to Washington and both worked at the Pentagon. I remember I used to go down. We would have such a hard time to get a reservation. You had to have a reservation on the train. I went down one year on the train and I was the only woman from Pittsburgh to Washington. I was on there with a bunch of soldiers. They were very nice. White and colored, all mixed. Then when we got to Washington, crowds and crowds. The station was filled with people. Then I went from Washington to Virginia. And I got on there again, it was nothing but soldiers. They were going down to Camp Lee. I remember I sitting in a seat because I couldn't get a seat back in one of the other coaches and there were several of them in the isles. I was scared to death. There weren't fights break out or anything. It was quite pleasant. They would sit down and talk. It was alright from that time. Then I remember one weekend Mariel was coming home and she was supposed to get in Saturday night. We went down to the station and she wasn't there. People were pouring

off the train. The station was full of people here in Youngstown. There was a B&O. She didn't come in. I went back again later on that night and she didn't come in. And I went nuts. What has happened? I called the Y where she was staying in Washington and they said she had left. And where was she? And what it was, she wasn't able to get a train out. She was just waiting in the station. And finally, she did come home and I was so happy. I know what she went through to get home. Now where have you been? What happened? But I wasn't the only one down there. Several people were down there looking for relatives to come in and they were caught in that rush in Washington just like she was.

DG: The station must have been a pretty big place then.

IW: At that time. You've been to Washington, haven't you? That Washington station is a big place. And you could hardly find standing room there. Even the B&O down here would be... In fact, all of them would be. They had the Erie station then. And old New York station was out there. I don't know when they stopped the trains from running out there on Wilson Avenue. When you branch of Wilson Ave and then you go up Himrod. Do you remember that old station right across on the right-hand side? I've never been in there because we were never going that way. I've only been in the B&O. Oh, I've been in the Erie, but we were going to Cleveland or something at the time. But it was crowds and crowds of people.

DG: Was it something to do with the war?

IW: That was it. That was during the war. It hasn't been crowded like that since.

DG: Is that how people preferred to travel then?

IW: Yes, they did at the time. I was sorry when they took the trains off. I liked the train. Really better than I do the bus. Because the bus is a little cramped. To me they are. In the trains, you can get up and walk back and forth. Of course, you can walk in the bus but its little isles. I wish they'd put the trains back on. I've never taken a plane flight. Mariel did in June. We all went down to Virginia, my brother-in-law died. And we all drove down. But Mariel had to come back

to go to work. And that's the first time she's taken a plane. She said, I hope I make it. And she loved it.

DG: What changes did you see in Youngstown because of the war?

IW: Well, I'm quite sure the mills changed over making metals. Because for a short time, I was out at the Arsenal. I think most everybody in Youngstown went out to the Arsenal, you know? Out to Ravenna. I was there for a short time until my doctor stopped me. He called my husband to tell him "Don't let her go back out there." And I didn't go back. I worked at that thing for about a year and a half during the war. They made shells and bombs and that sort of thing. I was in the Change House first where the girls would come and change into their uniforms from their regular clothes. And then I worked out on the assembly line. And that's where I was.

DG: Was there a lot of commotion or change here? Were there many soldiers around or camps?

IW: I can't really say. I know there were quite a few soldiers around here, but I can't think of any camps. Because I remember- the people weren't mean like they are now- I would ride in the bus. I would get off the bus down on Oak Hill, and I would call my husband and tell him I was on my way. And by the time he would get down to about West Avenue I would be just about be there myself. I would run a little bit, skip a little bit. I would walk real fast so he wouldn't have to come so far into town. But nobody would molest you. But that's the way we did it until I contacted someone I could ride with. But I would ride the bus.

DG: Did you take the bus to go shopping?

IW: Yeah. No malls then. All your shopping you did at little corner stores, then the A&P, Krogers. You have no malls at that time. And I'm thankful for the malls now.

DG: Do you prefer them?

IW: I like them because you go out and you park and you just walk around. Like in the winter time, you don't have to come out for anything. You just do all your shopping right in there. If you go downtown- of course they have McKelvey's and Strouss' have their own parking places- but then if you want to go into stores, you gotta come out and go up the street or vice versa. But there, you just walk around and do all your shopping. And I like that!

DG: Do you remember the end of the war, how people felt about the atomic bomb?

IW: Oh some people resented it and they thought maybe we shouldn't have done that. I think there's always a reaction for something like that. You think of all the innocent people that are being hurt. For instance, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the reaction there. Oh, it was a terrible thing. Just the reason about it. They had to say it. For me, myself I think maybe they should have done it, maybe they shouldn't have. I don't know. For me, I thought too it was such a terrible thing because you think about all the little children and all the older people, all the innocent people period that were killed or hurt in the whole thing. That's the world, I guess.

DG: I'm going to back track a little and ask you about when you first came to Youngstown from Virginia, was it hard at first in Youngstown to find a job and get settled? Did you like Youngstown? Did you feel welcome or at home?

IW: My husband got a job at the Plate Mill and it wasn't hard. I didn't like Youngstown, no. Because I couldn't stand all the noise and all the dirt. It was a long time before I got used to being here. There were some friends of my dad's he had met that were very nice. For instance, she was Mary Locket, that is retired some time ago from the schools. She was the superintendent of some of the schools around here. I can't think of her last name- Folton? We met her and her mother and sister. That's when my dad was staying with them, when he came up here. And we meet them and some other friends of my dad. And they tried to make us welcome. But people were more prejudice then then they are now. [readjust microphone] Because they are hiring. I don't think it was just the color. It would be about just about any- like Puerto Ricans or Mexicans, or whatever that would come in. They couldn't get jobs the Caucasians could get. At

that time, you go to the theater and you sit in a certain section. Then all that past. [phone rings. Recording paused.]

DG: What other things were segregated besides theaters?

IW: Stores. There weren't as many colored working in stores like there are now. You couldn't get a job. They didn't care what kind of education you had. It was just hard to get into those jobs. Just prejudice like you would have found all over. But then that passed and people began to integrate- school teachers and what have you. So it was alright.

DG: Did your children feel different at school or anything?

IW: Well, you know, children don't pay that sort of thing too much attention. They go along and play with each other unless they've been taught racial things. My daughter, for a long time, when she'd come home and she'd say "I met so-and-so today." And sometimes I'd say "Was she white or colored?" "I don't know!" You know, she didn't know! So they never paid it no attention. They just went along and played together unless their parents would object.

DG: Were racial attitudes better in Youngstown than they were in Virginia?

IW: Well down South, there's always a lot of prejudice. But I didn't run up against it too much down there. I didn't. We lived in a mixed neighborhood down there. My dad had a good job. It never bothered me.

DG:

IW: I know my husband, after he was foreman, there was one Southern white man working. He told him something to do and he told him he wasn't going to take orders from him. So he told him if he wasn't going to take orders from him, he would just send him to the office. So he did. So the boss there told him he had to take orders from him or else he could leave. So, you run into

little things like that and wherever there was a colored over a whole or mixed group you'd run into that sort of thing. But now I don't think people pay too much attention.

[Husband comes in.]

IW: She was asking me about the interview for the mill in the paper. I told her I couldn't tell her. The conditions in the mills when you were working in there.

CW: That's a long story!

DG: Well, I've got a lot of tape.

CW: I don't suppose I can tell you what was in the paper.

IW: She didn't read what was in the paper.

CW: It was just an explanation of the kind of discrimination that took place in those times and conditions. There have been changes made then that people getting into departments, working in departments and getting advancements that they weren't able to do back then. I can't document specific cases of course.

IW: Because you were the first colored foreman in Sheet and Tube.

CW: Yes, but that's the only part that I saw. And the only reason that was accomplished was because the group in the department put on pressure on and the man at the head of the department at the time just happened to be kind of conservative in his views. Otherwise, it wouldn't have happened even then. Then of course, we've had a lot of changes since that time. This recent law- I don't know if you've heard about it- people complaining about the consent decree handed down in Alabama. It has to do with the same thing in the mills: the need to pay some of these people back-time because they weren't allowed to benefit because of the department they worked in. These people came up and they can transfer these people around and they weren't given the chance of advancement. Now people who is in there have no business

being in there in the first place are hollering because the other people have back-time! That makes some complications, you know. There's been so many changes. It comes in such an orderly way until you forget it. You live day to day and you don't notice these changes until all of a sudden- boom! Its there.

IW: I was telling her about the scoreboard they used to have down on the square for the World Series. I'd forgotten about that!

W: Before television. They had a few scoreboards down on the square. The Vindicator and other parties financed it too. Not only here, but in other places too- people used to sit and congregate in parks to hear the World Series. We had an animated scoreboard. You could see the ball.

DG: So there wasn't radio and TV and that's why they had it?

CW: Before TV. They had some radio.

IW: They weren't as plentiful as they are now.

CW: Old fashioned Christmas sets.

DG: Can you think of anything else you'd like to tell me. Anything at all. I had one person tell me about murder cases and axes...

IW: I don't want to remember. There's too many of those things going on now.

DG: Weather-wise, what about long period of draught? You had gardens...

IW: No. We had a garden down here. We didn't have that would affect the garden. Because I could water it. So I didn't think about that. You know though in the change all around in here. What is Rockview now was Garlick Street. That's right down here. That was before they started

putting the freeway in. They used to call it Garlick Street. Then they changed the name to Rockview. It was probably changed a lot about that.

DG: Was there any reason?

IW: I don't remember hearing any reason why they changed it. If someone else were there, they might remember. I never heard an explanation why they changed it from Garlick to Rockview. We lived on it when it was Garlick Street. That was where we moved when we moved over here in 1928. That's it.

DG: Thank you. I've taken up enough of your time.

[end 56:16]